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SPENCER'S DOWNTOWN: IOWA CULTURAL DISTRICT

Spencer proponents eye Great Places designation

By Randy M. Cauthron
Managing Editor

In the past year, Spencer has been designated both a cultural and historic district in the state of Iowa, and was named the number one place to live in America by a national real estate web site. Now Spencer is considering the title of "Great Place."

The citizens of Spencer took the first step in a process that could earn the city the designation of a "Great Place" in Iowa Wednesday afternoon. They attended a kick-off meeting explaining the program and the process. The next steps require a bit more work.

Based on the crowd at the SCT Playhouse meeting loca-

tion, there are plenty of hands to get the work done. City, county and state representatives were on hand alongside business and artistic leaders, and interested citizens.

Iowa's Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson was in town to take part in the discussion. "What we want to do is identify great places, capitalize on them, learn from them, and make them even better....And we need your help to do it."

Spencer is the second stop on the Iowa Great Places Forum tour. Great Places is a Vilsack - Pederson Administration Initiative designed to promote bold thought, innovation and entrepreneurship to cultivate the unique and authentic qualities that make places in Iowa so

special. The initiative turns the state into a new kind of partner with Iowans - demystifying government, combining resources for impact and delivering the results.

After the encouraging comments from Pederson, Anita Walker, Director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs detailed the idea behind the program as well as what a city's representation will have to do to earn the designation.

"I have the best job," Walker said with a smile. "Isn't this a great place we're in? I can't imagine a better place to be launching Great Places."

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Local Spencer Alliance for a Creative Economy (SPACE) President Jim Schooley, Iowa Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson, Spencer Mayor Reynold Peterson, and Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs Director Anita Walker unveil Spencer's designation as Iowa's first Cultural District selection.

Photo by Randy M. Cauthron



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Walker shared the charge from Gov. Tom Vilsack that accompanies the Great Places program. "Iowans, let's look around the place that we are. What's real, what's authentic, and what's unique?....Then let's be bold and creative about what we have to do to make this a great place to live."

In a computer presentation, Walker outlined the seven dimensions of a Great Place including: A unique sense of place; engaging experiences; a rich social fabric; a vital economy; a pleasing environment; a strong foundation; and a creative culture. These items will be heavily considered in announcing the state's first three Great Place locations.

The city organizers, if they choose to seek out the Great Places designation, will not be on their own in the effort to prepare an offer for the state. The forum was just the first

step in the process. The next stop is inviting the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board to help create an offer. That invitation is extended via a one-page letter that must be submitted the board by July 1.

A coaching team will be assigned and that team will begin working with the respective city to help put together the best offer possible. Those offers will be presented to the Citizen Advisory Board in September. The presentation will take on a form and be held in a place that the coach team thinks is best suited for each town.

Three pilot sites in the state are set to be identified in October and then negotiations to identify the right mix of state resources to help achieve the group's vision for its community.

The Great Places partnership agreement is due to be in place by Dec. 31.

The Citizen Advisory Board will consider offers in context of the seven dimensions, and

will assess each place's level of readiness to be a Great Place.

For those not chosen, the coaching process and development of a place profile will help communities identify strengths, gaps, potential resources, and the next steps need to increase the community's level of readiness.

The first year of the Great Places initiative is a learning laboratory according to organizers, and will give the state a preview of what places want to achieve in the near and distant future.

In addition to challenging the communities of the state, Vilsack also charged the state agencies with Executive Order 39 to focus on financial and technical resources, identifying ways to package together resources under their control into a competitive effort to be rewarded in Great Places.

Another outcome of the first year is to help state agencies better prepare and plan for programming and funding needs.

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Director, Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs

Anita Walker



Photo by Randy M. Cauthron

Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson explained the state of Iowa's plan to identify great places, capitalize from the them, learn from them and make them better.

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